

# THE FUTURE OF SALES

Rise of the Strategic Seller





# INTRODUCTION

Are sales organizations less relevant in an era when buyers rely on technology and their own networks to make purchase decisions? We're seeing plenty of doom and gloom about the future of work, specifically sales. Forrester forecasts that in the US alone, 1 million B2B salespeople will lose their jobs to self-service eCommerce by 2020. That's 20% of the B2B sales force, gone, three years from now.

There's little question that technologies such as AI and machine learning will continue to change our profession, especially for simple transactional sales. But, make no mistake, you and your team

will play a prominent role in the future of sales as well. The evidence suggests that demand for "buyer-driven" sales practices is greater than ever. And companies that have built sales and marketing organizations around this insight are realizing a material competitive advantage.

For this eBook, we took an inside look at our own LinkedIn data, and rounded up insights from top experts in the field, to get a clear look at where sales is heading. We will examine the ascendance of a new generation of sales professionals, as well as the methodologies and tools that are reshaping the selling landscape.

The state of sales is very much in flux. On the one hand, we are facing an all-new set of challenges — namely, adapting in a marketplace where digital commerce and emerging technologies are changing the very fundamentals of the job. On the other hand, this evolution brings with it many opportunities for those ready to embrace it.

When we talk to sales professionals about their outlooks, we tend to receive back a mix of concern and cautious optimism. Yes, they recognize the uncertainty on the horizon. And yes, they hear about the possibility of certain

# THE FUTURE OF SALES: BLEAK OR BRIGHT?

transactional roles being eliminated or outsourced, while marketing rises in importance and scope.

But they also know sales is the driving force that ultimately sustains an organization's revenue. It's not going away.

The key to ensuring a bright future is continually reinforcing our value as sales professionals, by transitioning to a more strategic approach that today's buyers seek. You can do so by unlocking the three keys to success, which we'll cover in the coming pages.

# THE EVOLUTION OF SALES

## 3 KEYS TO SUCCESS

Research from Accenture tells us that

*77% of buyers don't believe sellers understand their business well enough to be helpful.*

That's an alarming statistic. What drives this perception?

For the most part, it derives from shifting behaviors and expectations. Forrester tells us that 60% of buyers now prefer to transact online, up from 53% in 2015. In turn, this means they are operating in a more personal space, and so they expect a more tailored and customized experience.

Let's look at the numbers around these imperatives and follow up with some actionable takeaways. But first, we'll explore the underlying shift that is altering the very foundation of sales.



Sales pros can rise to the challenge and help drive this evolution by focusing on three crucial fixtures going forward:

# A SHIFT IN DEMAND

In the customer relationship continuum, you have a set of skills: transactional sales skills on your left, functional skills in the middle, and strategic sales skills on the right. We wanted to see the movement trends between these skills, so we analyzed our own data.

Transactional skills are those traditional staples like sales, account management, business development, and sales leadership. These are relatively common. In fact, about 49% of all sellers on LinkedIn list these transactional sales skills.

Functional sales skills, in the middle, are slightly more complex. These are skills like consultative selling, solution selling, consulting, networking.

These skills are more rare. Only about 11% of all sellers on LinkedIn have these functional sales skills. But they are 1.8 times more in-demand than transactional sales skills.

Moving to strategic sales skills, the most complex of all: these are skills like complex selling, partner management, business alliances. They're the rarest skills: only 1.5% of all sellers on LinkedIn list them on their profile. And they are more in-demand still.

Becoming a strategic seller requires alignment with the three aforementioned business directives, starting with marketing collaboration.



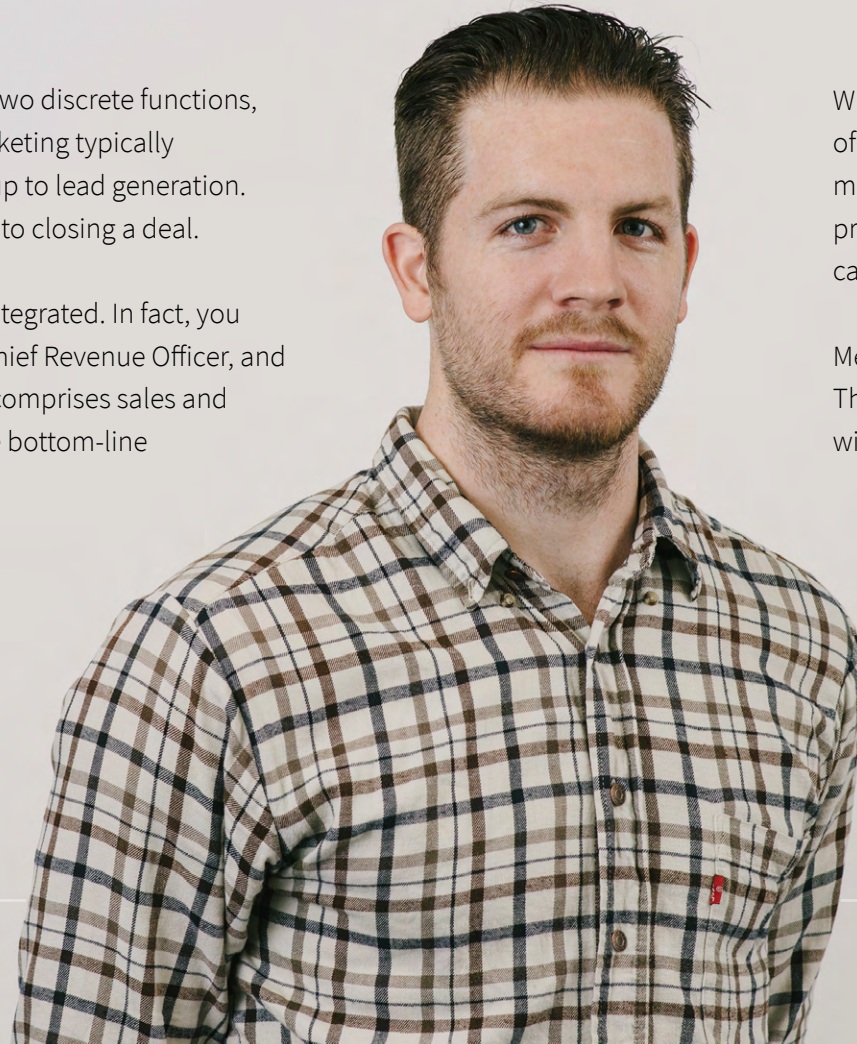
# THE CONVERGENCE OF SALES AND MARKETING

## RISE OF THE CHIEF REVENUE OFFICER

Historically, sales and marketing have had two discrete functions, and two very different sets of activities. Marketing typically controlled top-of-funnel brand awareness up to lead generation. Sales took over from lead generation down to closing a deal.

Increasingly we see these functions more integrated. In fact, you don't need to look much further than the Chief Revenue Officer, and the rise of the CRO role. It's a function that comprises sales and marketing, placing an ultimate focus on the bottom-line impact of both departments combined.

*We've seen a 73% increase in Chief Revenue Officer titles over the last three years on LinkedIn.*



What is really going on? What does the integration of sales and marketing look like? Well, it means marketing is now working lower in the funnel, using products like HubSpot and Marketo to manage campaigns through the point of conversion.

Meanwhile, sales reps are moving up in the funnel. They are aggregating, creating, and sharing content with their prospects or customers.

This overlap means that sales and marketing need to find ways to unify and co-opt their efforts.

# THE CONVERGENCE OF SALES AND MARKETING WORKING BETTER TOGETHER

One thing we've done at LinkedIn to assist organizations with this convergence is integrate our [Sales Navigator](#) and [Campaign Manager](#) tools, enabling sales pros and marketers to collaborate more seamlessly with their activities. When done right, this can powerfully enhance your results.

*LinkedIn's research found that a majority of companies feel a lack of alignment between sales and marketing leads to weaker financial performance, poorer customer experience, and reduced customer retention.*

For instance, our data shows that when a LinkedIn member is nurtured by a marketing campaign, they are 11% more likely to accept an invitation request from a seller at that company. When a LinkedIn member engages with a piece of marketing on the platform, they are 25% more likely to respond to a Sales Navigator InMail. And when a sales rep's connections receive a piece of content from that rep, they are 4.8 times more likely to share it because of the connection.

It is vital to take advantage of the many ways these two sides can support one another. Both also must take advantage of the technological advancements at their disposal.

Computer hardware company **Lenovo** uses Sales Navigator to align its sales and marketing functions, with exceptional results. Reps using the tool to share content from executives and marketing leaders get four times the engagement of non-users, and are nine times more connected to decision-makers.

*“Salespeople need to be more like marketers in this new digital world, and marketers need to be more like salespeople.”*



**Danielle Uskovic**  
Head of Digital & Social,  
Lenovo Asia Pacific



# USING AUTOMATION TO AUGMENT B2B SALES

## THE SALES TECH REVOLUTION

Without question, automation and artificial intelligence are disrupting the economy, leading to understandable concerns about the impact on human sellers. Forrester suggests that in four years, 22% of all sales jobs will be eliminated. Gardner says that by 2020, 85% of all transactions will be done online.

Where do sales professionals fit in going forward? Our own research shows that Big Data Analytics is the fastest-growing skill on LinkedIn, with a tenfold increase over the last three years.

Meanwhile, job listings for automation and AI competencies are up 234% in a year. As we step back and look at these numbers, it can certainly give the impression that sales faces a challenging future.

At the end of the day, though, B2B sellers still offer value and guidance that no machine can match. The path forward requires us to determine how technology and sales automation can make us better at fulfilling our roles in a buyer-driven market.





# USING AUTOMATION TO AUGMENT B2B SALES

## THE ROLE OF AUTOMATION IN B2B

We have been using automation to augment human effort at scale since the Industrial Revolution. Now, as the practice begins to hit a crescendo in the digital age, we are applying it to sales. We believe there are at least three ways automation will help B2B selling:

1. Automation will help reps focus on higher-value activity, reducing the time spent on repetitive work.

*Data from CSO Insights tells us that currently, only 40% of a rep's time is spent selling, with the other 60% spent on administrative tasks and training.*

2. Automation will improve overall rep productivity. By targeting better, finding the right decision-makers more quickly, and cutting out that manual investigative work, sales will drive stronger results with a more purposeful approach.

3. Automation will help with learning, and understanding the customer. Reps can more easily gain valuable real-time insights about prospects leading to better, smarter actions.

*Companies using sales enablement technology see a growth rate 3x higher than those eschewing such add-ons.*  
– Aberdeen Group

# USING AUTOMATION TO AUGMENT B2B SALES

## SALES TOOLS MAKE US MORE EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE

Much of the manual work that occupies a rep's valuable time involves administrative work relating to CRM. But when you integrate new add-ons with your CRM system, they can handle much of the previously manual updating in a more automated way.

Meanwhile, a tool like Sales Navigator cuts down the time spent on prospecting and research. Using predictive analytics and sales

intelligence, Sales Navigator automatically provides targeted leads and accounts that are more likely to respond, removing the tedium and rejection of chasing hopeless prospects. Sales Navigator's interface also puts the most urgent and actionable insights directly in front of sellers, calling out potential intent signals and opportunities.



Innovations in sales technology are helping us connect to the right people, in the right way. This, in turn, makes us more purposeful and productive on the job. Additionally, it is conducive to the personalized outreach buyers crave.

By using automated insights to augment their territory planning,

**Sprinklr** exemplifies the power of sales technology in boosting efficiency. Through Sales Navigator, they receive alerts when a champion within a targeted account is

promoted to a new position, and they adjust their lead scoring metrics accordingly. This enables the sales team to react and seize opportunities in real-time.

“Sales Navigator helps us leverage real insight to jump on opportunities the second they become available,” says the team at Sprinklr.

*LinkedIn's research found that sales professionals who connect directly with decision makers and engage with their content see lift in win rates by 29% on average.*

# PERSONALIZATION AT SCALE

## PERSONALIZATION PAYS

Companies like Netflix are using vast amounts of data to serve up very precise and tailored entertainment suggestions. Amazon and Uber are changing the way businesses and consumers interact. And buyers are bringing this from their personal lives into their professional lives. They are asking for tailored interactions, and it is resetting the bar.

*Our research shows that 77% of buyers want customized, integrated insights and data.*

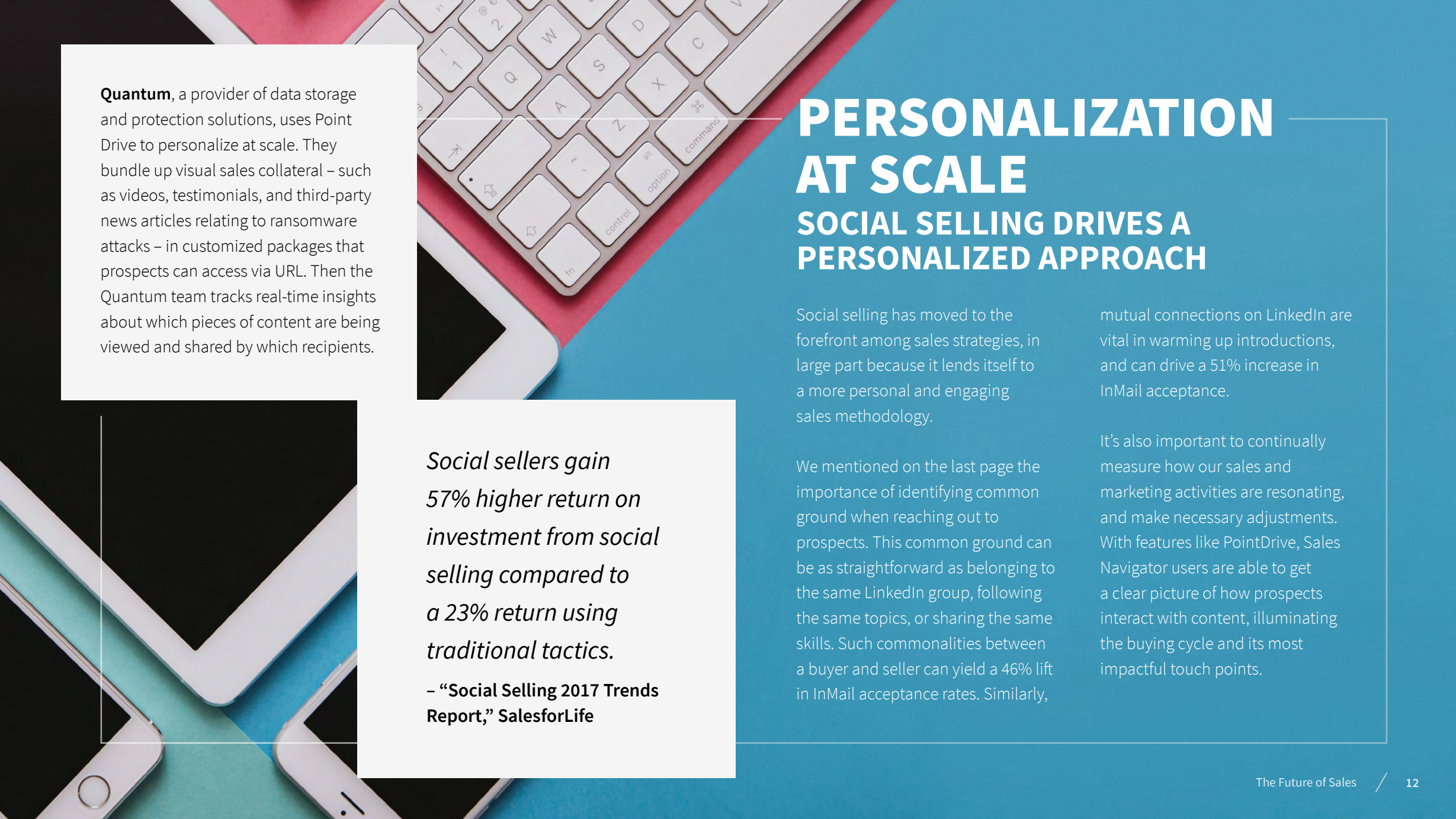
Some sellers are measuring up to these expectations, and there is real value when they do.

Cold calling gets a 1% response rate. Email, maybe 3%. LinkedIn InMail has a baseline around 15%.

*But top sales pros are getting upwards of 30% response rate on InMail because they are personalizing at scale.*

They are finding common ground with prospects and delivering directly relevant information.

How are they doing it? With social selling.



**Quantum**, a provider of data storage and protection solutions, uses Point Drive to personalize at scale. They bundle up visual sales collateral – such as videos, testimonials, and third-party news articles relating to ransomware attacks – in customized packages that prospects can access via URL. Then the Quantum team tracks real-time insights about which pieces of content are being viewed and shared by which recipients.

*Social sellers gain 57% higher return on investment from social selling compared to a 23% return using traditional tactics.*

– **“Social Selling 2017 Trends Report,” SalesforLife**

# PERSONALIZATION AT SCALE

## SOCIAL SELLING DRIVES A PERSONALIZED APPROACH

Social selling has moved to the forefront among sales strategies, in large part because it lends itself to a more personal and engaging sales methodology.

We mentioned on the last page the importance of identifying common ground when reaching out to prospects. This common ground can be as straightforward as belonging to the same LinkedIn group, following the same topics, or sharing the same skills. Such commonalities between a buyer and seller can yield a 46% lift in InMail acceptance rates. Similarly,

mutual connections on LinkedIn are vital in warming up introductions, and can drive a 51% increase in InMail acceptance.

It’s also important to continually measure how our sales and marketing activities are resonating, and make necessary adjustments. With features like PointDrive, Sales Navigator users are able to get a clear picture of how prospects interact with content, illuminating the buying cycle and its most impactful touch points.

# 3 ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT NOW

What we clearly see is an evolution – a move toward strategic selling. If we as sellers don't orient ourselves accordingly, we risk becoming irrelevant. Here are three actions you can take to get on the right track:

## Ensure you have the right skillset for tomorrow.

That means developing those strategic sales skills and hiring those who have them. Strategic skills will only grow in demand while transactional skills continue to fade.

## Think about your organization's sales and marketing process, and how to optimize it.

Where are the opportunities to align and mutually benefit? We must stop thinking in terms of credit attribution and turn our gaze toward collectively boosting bottom-line revenue by delivering great all-around customer experiences.

## Explore ways that technology can help you and your team sell better, and smarter.

Automation tools can cut down drastically on administrative tasks, allowing reps to spend more time on activities that fuel the pipeline. Sales Navigator uncovers real-time insights, leading to superior outreach and results.

There has never been a more challenging time to work in sales. There has also never been a more exciting time. As you embark on the path to a bright future, we'll be here to help you navigate the twists and turns.



Ready to target the right buyers, understand key insights, and engage with personalized outreach using Sales Navigator?

LinkedIn Sales Navigator makes it simple to establish and grow relationships with prospects and customers by helping you tap into the power of LinkedIn, the world's largest professional network of 500 million members. Designed for sales professionals, LinkedIn Sales Navigator combines LinkedIn's network data, relevant news sources, and your accounts, leads, and preferences to produce customized recommendations and insights.



With LinkedIn Sales Navigator, you can focus on the right people and companies, stay up-to-date on what's happening with your accounts, and build trust with your prospects and customers.

For more information, please visit [sales.linkedin.com/blog](https://sales.linkedin.com/blog).

